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SUBJECT: U.S.-THAI RELATIONS: SUSTAINING OUR IMPORTANT
MILITARY-MILITARY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM AND ACCESS

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. As one of five U.S. treaty allies in Asia and straddling a major force projection air/sea corridor, Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Underpinning our strong bilateral relations is the U.S.-Thai security relationship, which is based on over fifty years of close cooperation. The relationship has advanced USG interests while developing Thai military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities. Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. should not be understated. Our military engagement affords us unique training venues in Asia, essential access to facilities amid vital sea and air lanes that support contingency and humanitarian missions, collaboration on cutting-edge medical research, a setting where we can undertake unique multinational exercises, and a partner that is a key ASEAN nation in which we continue to promote democratic ideals. As we look to the future, the alliance is increasingly valuable to U.S. broader interests, but it must also be nurtured to ensure continued benefits in a changing world. Areas in which we could enhance the relationship include military modernization, professionalization, peacekeeping capability, human rights, and weapons procurement.

CLOSE MILITARY RELATIONSHIP, UNIQUE BENEFITS TO US

¶2. (C) Our military relationship began during World War II when the U.S. trained hundreds of Thais as part of the "Free Thai Movement" that covertly conducted special operations against the Japanese forces occupying Thailand and drew closer during the Korean War era when Thailand provided troops for the UN effort. Thai soldiers, sailors, and airmen also fought side-by-side with U.S. counterparts in the Vietnam War and, more recently, Thailand sent contingents to Afghanistan and Iraq. The relationship provides significant benefits to Thailand through security assistance, joint training and exercises, and a robust International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.

¶3. (C) The relationship has evolved into a partnership that provides the U.S. with unique benefits. These include distinctive force projection opportunities, the opportunity to conduct training exercises that are nearly impossible to match elsewhere in Asia, the opportunity to advance U.S. strategic goals, access to military leaders in a nation that is trying to strengthen democratic institutions, a willing

participant in international peacekeeping operations, and a partner in medical research which has produced widely-used vaccines. End Summary.

KEY FORCE PROJECTION OPPORTUNITIES

¶ 14. (S) The strength of our military relationship with Thailand provides us with benefits rarely achieved in our relations with other regional partners. One such benefit is ready access to many Thai military bases, most notably the Utapao Naval Air Base, built by the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Thailand quietly let the U.S. position aerial refueling assets at Utapao to support air-bridge operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and gave blanket airspace clearance for U.S. combat and support aircraft, some of which could not have made their initial bombing runs into Afghanistan without it. Thailand also permitted the U.S. military use Utapao as the hub for our regional tsunami assistance program in 2004-2005 and for our relief flights to Burma after cyclone Nargis in 2008. While high-profile relief operations have publicly highlighted the value of access to Utapao, our military quietly accesses the air base over 1,000 times per year for flights in support of U.S. operations, including missions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

¶ 15. (S) Moreover, the RTG has granted the U.S. military aircraft use of Utapao for flights on targets of intelligence interest, and we received permission for these operations as a matter of routine, without having to answer questions to the purpose of the flights. It is hard to imagine another Asian nation so easily permitting such operations. While we avoid publicizing our use of Utapao to avoid Thai sensitivities regarding the perception of foreign basing, Utapao and other Thai air fields and seaports remain vital to our force projection objectives in Southeast Asia.

UNIQUE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

¶ 16. (C) Thailand affords the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thailand offers good base infrastructure and large areas in which our aircraft and ground forces can conduct unrestricted operations, including training for electronic warfare. Opportunities to access such training infrastructure are in short supply elsewhere in Asia. Despite thousands of U.S. troops in Japan and Korea, training in those countries is increasingly limited due to physical and political constraints, and efforts to reduce our base footprint in those nations could make access to training facilities in Thailand even more important. Thai leaders are far more willing to host multinational exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or the Philippines, where planning for multinational exercises has been difficult, or Australia, which refuses to multilateralize Tandem Thrust; the Thai government encourages multinational exercises as a way to show regional leadership.

¶ 17. (C) Cobra Gold, the capstone event of our exercise program, is PACOM's largest annual multi-lateral exercise and for 28 years has served to strengthen our relations with Thailand, highlight our commitment to Southeast Asia, and provide exceptional training opportunities for our troops. The event has evolved over the years and now facilitates important objectives such as promoting a greater role in the Asian Pacific region for Japan and Singapore and re-establishing a partner role with Indonesia. Cobra Gold is key to building partner nation capacity in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, especially at a time when U.S. forces face other global commitments. We have also been able to incorporate into Cobra Gold a robust Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) event with active participation of Indonesia and Singapore.

¶ 18. (S/NF) A specific indication of Thai readiness to accommodate USG interests is its repeated willingness to host

the Ellipse Charlie counterterrorism exercises - most recently in 2008, but also in 2002 and 2003. That Malaysia and Cambodia were considered as hosts for the 2008 exercise but rejected due to difficulties related to national-level approval and their capacity to host, similar to what occurred in 2003 vis--vis Germany, underscores the ongoing value of the U.S. access in Thailand. These interagency exercises brought together members of FBI, State, special operations personnel, and others to exercise a range of intelligence and hostage rescue activities that likely could not have been conducted elsewhere in Asia (in 2003, lawyers concluded the exercise could not even be held on a U.S. base in Germany). In another example of the unique training opportunity found in Thailand, U.S. and Thai Navy SEALS conduct exercises on Chevron-owned gas and oil platforms in the Gulf of Thailand. Altogether, the U.S. averages over forty multilateral and bilateral exercises per year with Thailand.

ACCESS HELPS US SUPPORT DEMOCRACY

¶ 9. (C) Access to Thai military leaders, facilitated by the spectrum of activities in our mil-mil engagement program, including IMET and other efforts to promote professionalization, helped to restrain those inside and outside the Thai military who were pushing for an anti-democratic solution to Thailand's political conflict over the past year. Rumors persisted throughout the year that the Thai military would resort to a coup to resolve the difficult political conflicts. Throughout the discord, we consistently made the case to senior Thai military leaders that a coup would set back attempts to resolve the political divide, and would be met with widespread international criticism. Embassy contacts relayed to us that Army Commander General Anupong Paochinda resisted significant pressure to conduct a coup, and that he and others employed our message as a means to restrain those in favor of a coup.

PROMOTING REGIONAL PEACEKEEPING CAPABILITIES

¶ 10. (C) Thailand has historically been a strong supporter of UN peacekeeping missions and was an early contributing nation to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Thai generals very effectively led UN forces in East Timor, to which Thailand contributed 1,500 troops, and in Aceh where a Thai general served as the principal deputy of the Aceh Monitoring Mission, Thailand's success in peacekeeping has led the RTG and the military to seek a more prominent role in international stabilization and peacekeeping missions. For instance, Thailand is currently preparing for a deployment of a battalion of troops for the difficult-to-staff UNAMID mission in Darfur. We are working with the military to increase its capabilities, both as a contributing nation and as a trainer of neighboring nations. Using GPOI funding, necessary upgrades and modernization work to a peacekeeping training facility at Pranburi will be completed in FY09. Thailand will provide instructors and maintain the facility, which will be used for Thai peacekeepers for deployments abroad and for peacekeeping training events with regional partners. With the assistance of GPOI funding, Thailand is working to take a leadership role in regional peacekeeping training.

OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE ON AN IMPORTANT MARITIME SECURITY ROLE

¶ 11. (C) Beyond peacekeeping, we have also encouraged Thailand, given its location near strategic shipping lanes, to take on a larger role in assisting regional maritime security. In late 2008, the Thai military formally agreed to join Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in patrols of the Strait of Malacca. The Thai navy is currently working through operational and budgetary issues in order to maximize its effectiveness, but this was an important step in moving the Thai military to a greater regional role.

PARTNERSHIP IN MEDICAL RESEARCH, FIGHTING DISEASES

¶12. (SBU) The Bangkok-based Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences (AFRIMS) provides for unique opportunity to conduct medical research. Established more than 50 years ago by scientists from the U.S. and Thailand to facilitate the study of cholera, the institute is particularly valuable for testing the efficacy of vaccines, drugs, and devices due its location in a region of the world where many diseases of interest naturally occur. The region is the origin for a number of disease threats, including avian influenza, SARS, seasonal flu, and other viral disease agents. More than that, certain pathogens first gain their resistance to front-line drugs in this region. Some examples include the resistance to antibiotics of the bacteria that causes diarrhea and of the malaria parasites to artemisinin, the key component for post exposure malaria therapy. Accordingly, our ability to monitor these diseases in Bangkok provides much needed lead time before diseases spread elsewhere. In addition, research currently being conducted at AFRIMS on a HIV/AIDS vaccine has shown promising potential in phase III field testing.

¶13. (SBU) AFRIMS also provides an excellent training site to understand diseases that are rare in the West. Working with local physicians, U.S. military clinicians gain an understanding of how the local treatment regimens are implemented and gain a familiarity with diseases so that they are able to more rapidly and reliably diagnose and treat service members.

NOT TAKING THE RELATIONSHIP FOR GRANTED

¶14. (C) Because the geo-strategic landscape of Southeast Asia has changed dramatically over the past generation, we will never return to the heights of U.S.-Thai mil-mil partnership reached in the Vietnam War era, when the U.S. had more than 50,000 troops stationed in Thailand, used Thailand as the logistics and R&R hub for Indochina War efforts, and had members of the Thai military fighting side by side in integrated units with U.S. counterparts. The close, lifelong friendships between individual Thai and American military, intelligence, and law enforcement counterparts, who eventually rose to the top of their respective institutions, fed a wellspring of deep mutual understanding and affection for the past 30 years that served both countries well.

¶15. (C) That generation in both countries has now largely retired from government and uniformed service, and we must work harder to nurture the contacts and presumption of mutual shared interests that we have long taken for granted. As the shape of Southeast Asia, Asia writ large, and the world has changed, so have Thai attitudes. The Chinese have been making a major push to upgrade all aspects of relations, including mil-mil. Thailand is not interested in making a choice between the U.S. and China (nor do we see closer Chinese-Thai relations as automatically threatening to our interests here), but we will need to work harder to maintain the preferred status we have always enjoyed.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE OUR ENGAGEMENT

¶16. (C) Looking forward, we are working to build on our close relations with the Thai military. Areas in which we can focus efforts to enhance the relationship include:

-- Modernization: We continue to explore avenues to assist the Thai military's modernization efforts so that it is better able to conduct counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counternarcotics missions. Shaping our training and exercise program will be one key aspect of this process. We will also continue to push for the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTARF) to more quickly incorporate the Defense Reform Management System, now in Phase II, into the military's planning mechanisms.

-- Professionalization: We will need to continue to engage the Thai military in order to assist professionalization efforts. Of particular importance is Thai ability to conduct effective counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. Our ability to professionalize the military could help keep the southern insurgency domestic in nature, and possibly provide the environment for resolution through an integrated government approach that the new Thai government appears set on adopting. Increasing the professionalism of Thai forces would also reduce regional tensions by providing for more secure borders, lessening transnational threats such as narcotics trafficking, and assisting with national government attempts to resolve disputes, such as that with Cambodia over the border.

-- Human Rights: Troubling allegations of human rights abuses in southern Thailand persist. General Anupong has consistently expressed opposition to abuses, but we will continue to press the issue at the highest levels of the Thai government. The key to improving the situation, however, is likely at the junior officer and enlisted levels of the military. Therefore, we will continue to look for ways to focus our engagement to promote attention to human rights through our IMET program, joint training, and subject matter exchanges, and through targeted engagement with the Thai Army's training command.

-- Peacekeeping: We are working closely with RTARF leaders as they seek to realize their vision of the Thai military as a regional leader in peacekeeping operations and training. GPOI funding has been key to this effort, and we will need to maintain our commitment to assisting Thai efforts.

-- Weapons Procurement: While the Thai military procures armaments from a range of countries, the U.S. remains the country of first choice due to historical procurement programs and our close relations. In order to maintain that position, we need to be a responsive partner that is prepared to work together to meet Thai requirements for weapons and equipment modernization. In that regard, we are working closely with the Thai military to develop a comprehensive program that will meet Thai military needs through Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, Direct Commercial Sales, and other programs such as 1206 assistance.

JOHN